

THE BEGINNINGS OF MCC IN ENGLAND

by Jean White and Tom Bigelow

In 1972 Troy Perry visited London, England at the invitation of the Committee for Homosexual Equality and the Fellowship of Christ the Liberator. The latter was an independent church group which then decided to pursue membership within UFMCC. MCC London was chartered on October 7, 1973. The church did not have a pastor at that time, and Jo McVay Abbott acted as worship coordinator.

In October 1974 Tom Bigelow was sent by the UFMCC Board of Elders to become the first UFMCC clergy in England and to serve as the World Church Extension Officer for the United Kingdom and Western Europe. The Rev. Bigelow had been in England before, having previously worked for the Anglican Community in Chester. At the time MCC London met in a neighborhood centre for worship services and used the flat of Jo McVay Abbott and Geoff Jarnell for their headquarters. In January 1975 Jo McVay Abbott was commissioned to begin a new church in Birmingham, and he moved there to begin the slow process of building a church.

Building churches in Great Britain is quite different than in the United States. The British people tend to take commitment quite seriously and are not so quick to try new things. It took a while for people to accept the idea of a new church from America for gay people. In addition, the vast majority of British people do not go to church services regularly.

The initial MCC outreach in England took various forms. At that time Gay News was a popular newspaper for the gay community throughout Great Britain. Tom Bigelow was asked to write a weekly column for this paper, and this allowed MCC to become known even in the small towns. Letters were received from all over the country. In addition, the Committee for Homosexual Equality (CHE) had chapters all over England, and MCC'ers were active in CHE. By speaking at various CHE chapters, MCC'ers got to know many gay Christians, and by holding worship services at the national conferences of CHE, MCC'ers gave others an opportunity to worship with MCC. MCC'ers also took part in parades and demonstrations, which caused MCC to become newsworthy. The Rev. Bigelow was asked to appear on the BBC and ITV (independent).

Since Tom Bigelow was an Episcopal priest, he tried to work with the Church of England (Anglican). Although some of the local priests were helpful and even attended MCC worship services, the bishops did not seem interested in working with MCC and refused to let MCC use any Church of England church buildings for worship.

There was an attempt to open a MCC ministry in Glasgow, Scotland but that effort failed to overcome the closetedness and fear of gay people in that area. The same problem existed in Northern Ireland despite some letter contact from there.



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Tom Bigelow attended some meetings with gay Christians on the European Continent but could not find anyone at the time interested in working with UFMCC. The one exception was Bjorn Marcussen in Copenhagen, Denmark, who guided his church group into UFMCC membership and became UFMCC clergy himself, until the early 1980's.

After two years in England, Tom Bigelow returned to the United States in 1976. Lee Carlton was sent to England for a short time (six months) to serve as Church Extension Officer. Ken Taylor, who had been the Assistant Pastor under Tom Bigelow became the Pastor of MCC London for a few months after the departure of the Rev. Bigelow. When the Rev. Taylor left, the two exhorters (student clergy) of the church, Nick Rowden and Jean White, ran the church until Jean White was licensed as UFMCC clergy in 1977. Rev. White has been the Pastor of MCC London since 1978.

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